

Family and Disaster

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"Family and Disaster" is the topic of the present seminar, a challenging topic because the family and the disaster are usually considered as very different social phenomena. Laymen conceive of them as the opposite of each other since disasters interfere with their peaceful family life. Social scientists use different conceptual frameworks to describe the two. Nevertheless, families and disasters have much in common, and they must be studied together if either phenomenon is to be fully understood.

The family is one of the very few social structures which exists in all cultures and societies. It is a universal group which represents cultural continuity and tradition, a group which is said to fulfil important social functions such as the introduction through birth and socialization of new members into society.

Disasters also occur world-wide, but they represent discontinuity; the new and unknown. Behaviours must change following disasters, or the society (and its organizations, groups, and individuals) will not be able to cope with the situation. Whether eufunctional or dysfunctional disasters certainly introduce change in society.

Family sociologists have devoted most of their time to the study of only one kind of social organization: the family as a group of people, and the family as part of the social structure. Sociologists in the disaster area are not specialists in any single form of social organization but focus their interest on events; i.e., things which happen during bounded periods of time.

The area of family studies is very different from that of disaster studies, and the differences are a challenge to a seminar on Family and Disaster: continuity **versus** discontinuity, structure **versus** event. The organizers of this seminar believe that antitheses can be used to develop a synthesis in social theory.

Many False Myths

Scientists and scholars have their theories about families and disasters, but also laymen have theirs, albeit the latter often consist of false myths. Both families and disasters are common topics in popular culture and mass media.

Many people believe disasters to be events during which the social order disappears, a time when disaster victims act out of their own self interest. They do not behave as prescribed by the norms of society. They are only interested in protecting themselves and their own belongings, according to popular myths. Panic and looting are said to be frequent behaviours, and nobody seems to care about the well-being of others. Disaster victims are described as being antisocial or at least asocial.

But social research has proven the popular myths to be false: there is a social order during disasters, and many social structures remain intact also when the physical environment breaks down. Quarantelli and Dynes (e.g., 1972 and 1973) have shown many of the popular images about disasters to be wrong: looting and panics are not frequently appearing, and human behaviour is governed by social norms also during and after disasters.

Disaster victims care for each other, and they do not forget about their obligations. On the contrary, families are very important indeed during disasters, and people are more worried about the well-being of their families than about their own personal safety. They also perform important disaster jobs in various organizations. Disaster victims are neither asocial nor antisocial, and families are important social actors following disasters.

The solidarity increases in a community during disasters. Turner (1967) has written that the society returns to a state of mechanical solidarity, where the similarity between community members is more important than the division of labour. The victims are alike, they all face the same difficulties, and they have to fulfil the same tasks. There are strong social norms demanding that the victims are treated equally and that they act in the same way. Deviant behaviour is punished by severe sanctions during the period immediately following a disaster.

Thus, there are changes in the social and normative order, but this is very different from a break-down of the society or its constituent groups.

The nuclear family is sometimes said to be disappearing from the modern industrialized countries; especially so in Sweden where the marriage rate has declined since the midsixties. All industrialized countries have meanwhile seen an increasing number of divorces and separations. The nuclear family seems to have lost its popularity among young people because it cannot satisfy their needs. It is said to be an antiquated social institution.

But the disappearance of the nuclear family is a myth. It remains a very popular group in Sweden. Trost (1980) has shown that more people live in nuclear families than ever before. The marriage rate is declining, but young people form nuclear families of procreation at an earlier age than before; they cohabit without marriage but under marriage-like conditions. People believe in family life also when they have divorced or separated; they remarry or start to cohabit once more.

The importance of the nuclear family is evident during disasters. People risk their lives in order to help their spouses, children, or parents, and family members are given the highest priority among the victims who need help. Neighbours and friends are second to the family (Hultåker, 1981 and 1982; Björklund, 1982). Moreover, people prefer to receive help from family and kin immediately following a disaster, since the family can provide social and emotional support along with other forms of help.

The nuclear family remains an important organization in the social structure and is of particular importance in emergencies.

Different Perspectives

Most family sociologists have used the perspective of social psychology in recent years. They have studied the family as a small group of interacting individuals. The developmental approach is one such framework which emphasizes changes in the structure and functioning of families when they develop through stages in the family life cycle (Hill and Rodgers, 1964).

The members of the developmental tradition have mostly studied internal family processes; the formation of new families by mate selection, marriage, and moving in; the enlargement of families by child-birth or adoption;

the development of families when children pass through preschool and school grades; the contracting and ending of families by launching of children, death, or divorce.

Changes in the situation of individual family members create a need for family change, according to the developmental approach, and families adapt through role-making and role-bargaining (Aldous, 1978). Family interdependency makes all family members highly dependent on each other, but they are fairly independent from the surrounding society if they succeed in setting and maintaining the boundaries enclosing the family.

Developmental changes are the result of internal family processes, among which decision-making processes are of utmost importance. Many developmental family sociologists consider the internal processes to be fairly independent of forces external to the family; changes in the external environment affect the situation of individual family members and create a need for change and family adaptation, but families decide themselves how they are going to adapt as long as they can manage to protect their boundaries.

Families are among those social organizations which fulfil the function of integrating individual human beings in the society-at-large. The family socializes children and adult people, and its members comply with the rules and norms of society because of the processes of cohesion-solidarity and social control. Other intermediate organizations can fulfil the same function, but the family is an important agent for social integration in all societies.

Theories about the family can be used to develop an understanding of individuals and their behaviours but also to analyze society-at-large. Family sociologists, however, have dealt more with individuals than with larger social organizations like communities, regions, and nations. Social psychologists, especially within the school of the developmental approach, have dominated the area of family sociology.

Exceptions are studies done within the structural-functional framework. Parsons and others have analyzed the consequences of families for society-at-large, but their perspective has carried a bias for positive and healthy consequences (Parsons, 1964; Parsons and Bales, 1955). Structural functionalists have not analyzed the possibility

that the family can have several dysfunctions in addition to some eufunctions. They have, for instance, looked into the internal organization of family life and believe the contemporary organization to be a prerequisite for a well functioning society, and that society needs the role specialization between the male provider and the female housekeeper, each being an expert.

Marxist sociologists have sometimes criticized the family, but they have been more prone to analyze the institutions of labour and economy than the contemporary family. Other sociologists have studied families from a non-marxist conflict perspective, but they have mostly analyzed conflicts and power structures inside the family, and they have dealt less with the relationship between the family and the society-at-large. They have used a social psychological perspective.

The family is a universal social organization, but few sociologists have analyzed how specific forms of the family are influenced by the social, cultural, and economic factors of a given country. There are a few studies like Goode's (1963) research on the impact of societal change on family patterns and Murdock's (1949) cross-cultural study of various types of family organization.

Disaster research has often been atheoretical. Many researchers have visited a disaster site without having a theoretical perspective or conceptual framework to guide their inquiries. They have not even read about earlier research in the area but happened to be involved in one particular disaster. No wonder there is a lack of well integrated research findings, and that many studies have methodological shortcomings.

Many students of disasters have entered the disaster sites with a strong belief in the popular but false myths about individual and organized behaviour following disasters. They have used methods and techniques which belong to the area of journalism rather than to science, and they have presented results similar to those of journalists.

Among the factors responsible for the present state of affairs is the relatively short history of disaster research. More important, however, is the lack of an institutional structure to assist the students of disasters. They do not have international nor national organizations, and they have gone without scientific journals and other means of

communication¹⁾. The situation is changing, however, and the last years have seen an increasing number of people working with disaster research, international cooperation is increasing, and we have witnessed more well integrated research than ever before.

Disaster research does not deal with any specific social structure, institution, or process, but its aim is the understanding of one kind of event. Thus, it brings together scholars from various areas of social science, who all have their different perspectives which they try to combine and develop into good interdisciplinary research. Such endeavors are never easy, and they will not rapidly result in grand theories of the encompassing type. No theory can yet explain or even give structure to the totality of disaster behaviour, but there are some few middle range theories (Merton, 1957) that can explain selected classes of phenomena occurring during disasters.

Attempts to arrive at an understanding of the totality of disasters have begun with typologies, where disasters have been classified according to the kind of agent causing them; e.g., floods, fires, landslides, snow-disasters, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, chemical disaster, etc. The fact that social scientists have used non-social criteria for their classifications is evidence of the lack of middle range theories. There are not enough such theories to constitute the foundation for a typology based on social criteria.

Classifications of disaster agents can hardly help researchers to develop social theories about disasters, but they need to find social dimensions describing similarities and dissimilarities between empirically occurring disasters.

Disaster scholars have tried various perspectives in

1) The situation has somewhat changed since 1980 when the present paper was first presented. Scholars interested in disaster research met during the World Congress of Sociology in Mexico City, 1982, to form a research committee for disaster research. They also decided to have a newsletter with the title "Unscheduled Events" and to sponsor a new scientific journal "International Journal of Disasters and Mass Emergencies" of which this is the first issue.

their attempts to find a theoretical foundation for their research. Among these are the fads and fashions of the academic society, but most promising is the tradition of collective behaviour where disaster behaviour is seen as non-institutionalized behaviour; i.e., the behaviour is not governed by institutionalized norms since the traditional norms do not fit in a rapidly changing society. Collective behaviour does not, however, disregard the importance of norms; it merely states that norms change and have different effects than in normal times.

Theoretical frameworks are necessary because they provide the researchers with their tools: their techniques, methods, terms, concepts, and perspectives. Moreover, a framework makes it possible for a scholar to compare his research area with similar and related areas which are studied within the same framework.

Crowds, panics, crazes, lynchings, riots, social movements, fashions, fads, and public opinion are among the phenomena studied within the framework of collective behaviour. Laypeople consider most of them to be instances of social disruption and the break-down of society, and the very choice of framework might add to the popular but false myths about disaster behaviours. Nevertheless, research has shown continuity to be prevailing during all kinds of collective behaviour events; social and cultural continuity is of much greater importance than is generally believed.

Collective behaviour is not synonymous with disruption nor the disappearance of society. On the contrary, no collective behaviour event can be understood without reference to the past history of a community.

Social Psychology and Collective Behaviour

Collective behaviour and social psychology were one and the same perspective back in the 19th century when Le Bon (1960) wrote about the group mind as something strange and difficult to understand. He believed human beings to be influenced by others when they met in groups, and the resulting behaviour was considered as morally inferior to the behaviour of individuals acting alone. Group behaviour seemed strange and difficult to comprehend.

But collective behaviour and social psychology went different ways. The latter came to constitute one of the main-streams of sociology dealing with group behaviour which was possible to understand. Collective behaviour remained the framework for the study of strange phenomena not covered by any other social perspective. Collective behaviour now represents rapid social change and unpredictability while social psychology represents continuity and predictability.

Many diverse phenomena have been classified as collective behaviour episodes, and much controversy has dealt with the reasons for grouping them together. It has sometimes seemed as if they had only two things in common: their reputation of being strange and the non-existing possibility to subsume them under any other paradigm of social theory. As soon as students were able to explain a mere fraction of a collective behaviour episode, it had a tendency to move in under the realm of other paradigms which has partly been the case with the study of revolutions and public opinion.

The crowd was until recently considered to be the prototype of collective behaviour, and it was studied by outstanding social scientists like Le Bon and Blumer (1946). The situation has changed, however, and more studies are today dealing with social movements and disasters. The focus of interest has also shifted away from the individual actors in collective behaviour episodes to the actions undertaken by groups and other collectivities. Social continuity is found also in times of rapid social change, and collective behaviour episodes are no exceptions.

Theories are developing which present characteristics, other than being strange, as common properties to all or most kinds of collective behaviour. There are similarities in the causes promoting various types of collective behaviour and also in the effects following the episodes. Most important, however, are the structural prerequisites that make rapid social change possible. Collective behaviour does not occur because people behave very differently than under normal conditions, but it results when individuals and collectivities act in a structurally imbalanced situation.

People act during disasters similarly to the ways they act in other situations; i.e., they are not irrational in their

decision-making, they remain members in the very same social organizations as before the disaster, and they are influenced by others through the same kind of processes as in normal times. The post-disaster milieu, however, is so very different than was the environment before the impact, and traditional behaviour will have unfamiliar consequences. Not only does there exist a structural imbalance, but the available resources have diminished which affects the outcome of social and individual actions.

Much disaster behaviour is institutionalized. People comply with the existing rules of their groups although they sometimes face situations where the pre-disaster norms are not applicable. The victims have to try new behaviours but they neither change their basic values nor their priorities.

Micro and Macro Analysis

Fritz (1968) once defined disasters as incidents where a society or part of it is affected to an extent such that the social structure is hurt and important social functions impeded. The scope of disaster research thus defined has been accepted by most scholars in the area, who accordingly have focused their interest on disasters affecting a society or a community at least. They have not paid any attention to smaller-scale incidents affecting single families however traumatic the effects are for the victims.

Single family accidents have been excluded from disaster research since they can routinely be handled by a community used to taking care of various types of small-scale incidents. The death of a man in a car accident will certainly affect his family, the members of which will experience stress both individually and as a family unit; they need to reorganize their entire family life following an accident that is unique to them. Hospitals, police departments, and community welfare agencies will not change, however, because of car accidents which occur very frequently. The community has developed routines for handling them in a manner that will not hurt the society nor impede important social functions.

There are, nevertheless, situations when the death of one person can hurt not only a community but the whole

world, as was the case in 1912 when an Austrian prince was killed by a shot in the Serbian town Sarajevo, an event which started World War I. Other cities have seen racial or ethnic riots follow the death of just one person. The social status of the victim is of less importance than is the context where the death occurs. It will not affect the society-at-large unless there is a structural imbalance. A small-scale incident can only hurt the society when there is structural imbalance **and** when, at the same time, society lacks the resources necessary to respond to the demands for collective action. Most people play critical roles in their families where they are not easily replaced, but a community is rarely affected by the death or disappearance of one person.

Hill (1949) and associates have presented the family stress theory which provides a paradigm for the study of families under stress. It cannot, however, be used as the only framework of disaster research on families because it would include both too much and too little. Many families are also important social actors during disasters where they are not themselves directly affected, and many families experience stress in other situations than during disasters. It should be emphasized, however, that the family stress theory has provided many important research findings of relevance to the area of disaster studies which can be seen from the chapters by Boss and McCubbin et al in this volume.

Social disaster research is the study of events where a community is affected, and it must therefore include an analysis of the society-at-large and of interacting collectivities. Such macro analyses would benefit from cross-cultural studies but there are very few of them within the area of disaster research. The situation is not much better within the family sociology although two of the very best cross-cultural studies ever performed made use of important family concepts: Durkheim's (1897) *Le suicide* and Murdock's (1949) *Social structure*.

Most students of disasters as well as of families live in North America or in Western Europe, and the majority of research findings come from these parts of the world despite the fact that most disaster victims live in developing countries. The organizers of the seminar on Family and Disaster tried to include research findings from all parts of the world, and they appreciate the

attendance of several scholars from Asia. It was impossible, however, to find interested colleagues in Africa or Latin America.

Conclusions

Disaster victims do not act as independent individuals, but their responses are to a high extent influenced by the families where they belong. Family members try to meet as soon as they learn that a disaster has occurred or is impending; they return to home if possible or they go to a place where they are likely to find other members of their families, often in the homes of relatives or close friends. Victims take great risks when they search for and try to rescue their family and kin, and it is almost impossible to keep them off a disaster site if they fear that family members are left in the debris. The same risk-taking can be seen before an impending disaster when people return to a threatened area to meet and look for their families.

Families decide as collectivities about their disaster activities, and the members often stay together even when they disagree about the best future actions. The family cohesion is strong and joint actions are considered so important that disagreeing individuals are willing to yield. Victim families sometimes allocate family tasks which make necessary a temporary separation of family members as is the case when fathers return to the disaster site in order to look for missing family members or belongings while mothers stay with the children in the home of relatives. But also temporary separations are decided upon **in corpore** and the decisions often include when and where to reunite.

Families constitute one of the links between individuals and the society-at-large, and they often are the only remaining links immediately following disasters. The victims depend on their families and kind for social resources and support which are in normal times provided by formal agencies and organizations. Moreover, families mediate the flow of information from rescue organizations and community leaders. Individuals do not follow their recommendations and orders unless they are supported by family decisions, which may take a long time when the families have to meet and validate the official information before they can make their decisions.

There is a need for more disaster research about the family as a link between individuals and the society-at-large. The resulting findings will not only enhance social theory but will also help people actively involved in the mitigation of the consequences of disasters. It is important, however, not only to look for the eufunctions fulfilled by families but to be aware of that families bring dysfunctions as well. Family behaviour can have both positive and negative effects for the society-at-large and for individual family members. Increased cooperation between family members will not always result in effective allocation of the resources available in a community. Increased family cohesion may impede the solidarity of society, and family decisions may oppose decisions taken by public authorities as is the case when families decide not to follow an evacuation plan.

Family and disaster research asks for theories that can explain both the eufunctions and the dysfunctions fulfilled by families. It is an opportunity to study temporary and permanent social change in periods of collectively experienced hardship. Most important, however, it tells us how to help millions of suffering people. Family and disaster is a challenging topic.